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Concepts

 

I will always remember that day, laying on my back looking at the clouds and waiting to finally die.

Considering the amount of pain I was in, it was taking an inconveniently long time.

To this day, I don't remember getting shot. I don't even remember being forced out of our trench and told to advance on the enemy. One second I was hunkering down in my trench and the next I was experiencing the worst pain of my life in the middle of the battlefield.

I could see our trenches from where I was. I could see the other Malvir conscripts moving around in them. I didn't call out for help. Never occurred to me to try. They were all strangers to me. People who I had just met that morning.

I was never supposed to be on that battlefield. I knew that a force of Kyrap had landed an invasion force just outside a city on the other end of the continent, but I was a professor of philosophy at the local university which meant I was immune from conscription. I had no fear as the conscription gang entered the grocery store I was in.

I think I first began to realise something was wrong when the conscription officer was taking extra long examining my papers. Usually they would see my papers showing that as a professor I was immune, do a quick check on their equipment to confirm, and then move on to the next poor unfortunate person. This time however, it was like the officer was *trying* find something wrong with it.

The officer looked up from the papers to stare at me for a second. I saw something in his eyes I didn't understand at the time, and then watched in horror as he put my papers somewhere in an inside pocket and motioned his fellow conscripts to take me out to the van for processing.

I didn't understand what went wrong. I tried telling him that I was immune and he just told me to shut up and that my fake papers wouldn't get me out of this. It was only later where I realised that his squad was probably told to find a certain number of people to conscript in that grocery store or that they themselves would be conscripted to go defend against the Kyrap. At the time, I hated him for it and cursed his soul to the underworld, but looking back on it... I can't say I blame him. I can't even say I wouldn't have done the same thing in his place.

Forcible conscription was the only way the species of the galaxy could fight their wars.

As a philosophy professor, I was very familiar with the utter absurdity of war. It was something that had no right to exist. It went against the very nature of every sentient being that has been encountered. It shouldn't even be possible.

Individuals will fight to protect themselves. They will fight to the death to protect their loved ones. They might even do it for friends. They will even group up to protect their town or city if there's no way to get themselves or their loved ones away in time. But to fight and die for *strangers*? In a completely different city? To forcibly take someone else's city away from them? What was the point? Who would do that?

Governments felt differently. Too many of them looked at the holdings of their galactic neighbours with jealousy. They quickly discovered war as a perfect way to acquire those holdings for themselves and conscription as a perfect tool to fight those wars.

After processing, I was loaded onto a transport with hundreds of other conscripts and flown directly to the city under attack. Once the transport landed, the crew didn't even bother asking us to disembark. They had already dealt with conscripts unwilling to get off the transport far too often. Instead they just immediately started pumping some sort of gas into the passenger compartment that made it impossible to breathe to force us to disembark. As I was running out of the transport, none of the crew I passed would even look at us through their masks. They too were conscripted for this duty, I knew. They were told they were to ferry conscripts to the frontline or they would serve on it themselves.

Once on the ground, we were handed our weapons and told that if we want to live through this, we would have to successfully defend this city. There would be no retreat. We win or we die.

It was on that day, on that battlefield, waiting to die while examining the philosophical absurdity of war, that everything changed.

It was during a lull in the battle where I could hear some kind of commotion coming from our trenches. I turned to look and my pain was momentarily forgotten as my mind grappled with what I was seeing.

Humans were in our trenches.

I was vaguely familiar with the "Humans" that were discovered just a few cycles ago by one of our survey ships. They were a technologically primitive species that was just beginning to take its first steps into space. I believe we had a closer trade relationship with them than most, considering how close they were, galactically speaking. Some of their luxury goods were just beginning to make their way to our colony world when the Kyrfrap invaded.

But none of that explained what they were doing *here*. In *our* trenches. Why would the humans send conscripts all the way out here? What could the Mavlir government have offered them for that?

There was something weird about how the humans were acting. I wasn't familiar with their body language at all but something was different about these conscripts. They didn't look confused. They didn't fumble with their weapons. They actually looked like they knew what they were doing.

My curiosity overcame me and my injury was completely forgotten. I had to get a better look. I had to *understand*.

I then made the mistake of trying to sit up.

Immediately my injury came back to the forefront of my mind. The pain was even worse than before. It became my entire world. In that moment, I wanted nothing more than to be back home where it was safe. I am not ashamed to say that I started crying out for my mother. I wanted nothing more than to wake up in my childhood bed and have my mother comfort me and tell me this was all a bad dream.

Unless you have experienced something like that, where the hopelessness and the pain just overwhelm you, it's impossible for me to tell you what it does to the mind. If you have experienced it, you don't need me to tell you.

Finally, the pain died down to only a little bit worse than it was before. It was then where I could hear arguing. I looked over and in the trench closest to me I saw two humans arguing with some of the Mavliir around them. The Mavliir only stared at the humans with what looked like confusion.

I could see the two humans look at each other and then they started doing something with their hands. They each shook a fist 3 times in sync with each other and then they both, at the same time, posed their hand each in a different way. One conscript had their hand out flat and the other had what looked like two fingers held away from their fist.

They spent a few more seconds looking at each other before the human who had the fist with two fingers leapt out of the trench and, while trying to keep their head down, started running towards something in my direction.

Looking back on it, I don't think I realised until the conscript was almost on top of me that they were actually running to *me*.

I've thought about that moment many times in the cycles that followed, and I don't think I've ever been able to parse out all the emotions I felt when I finally figured out that I was actually his objective. Amazement was a big one. So was puzzlement. Curiosity was also definitely up there.

Of course, when I saw him reach down to grab me, fear pushed out all my other emotions. Not because I thought he was going to hurt me. I didn't know what his intentions were, but I figured the human wouldn't run out into the middle of a battlefield just to kill a Mavliir that was already dying.

No, I felt fear because I knew him grabbing me was **really going to hurt**.

I remember immense pain and then nothing.

I awoke sometime later. Looking around me, all I could see were humans. There were no Malvir around.

Not too far away was the human who rescued me.

In Galactic Common, I asked "What happened?"

"Oh hey, you're awake! That's good! We weren't sure if I did any damage when I picked you up. Okay, you're in our staging area. After I grabbed you and got you back to safety we tried to find a proper Malvir medic for you but we couldn't find any. So I did my best to stabilise you and brought you back here while we tried to find a Malvir doctor for you. We're going to find one for you real soon though. You're going to be okay"

"You're a doctor at the front lines?"

"Oh, no I'm not a proper doctor. I'm just a field medic."

I looked at him in some confusion. While in most societies, those with medical knowledge weren't immune from conscription as their skills were far too useful, they were never risked where actual fighting was taking place. I wondered if there was something different about human society that might have given them enough medical professionals to feel the risk was worth it.

I had a far more pressing question I needed an answer for, though.

"Why?"

"Huh? What do you mean 'why'? Look, I know I said you're going to be okay, but you really need to be looked over by someone more knowledgeable in your physiology. We were sent out here on very short notice and there was only time for a very rudimentary briefing on your species."

"No, not that. Why did you rescue me? We don't know each other. I've never met you before in my life. Why did you rescue me?"

He looked at me for several moments before answering.

"Because you needed help. I could hear your cries from where I was standing. I couldn't listen to them and just do nothing."

I think he could see my confusion because he went on.

"Look, I know we're different species. But I'm a medic. To me, a person injured is a person injured, especially if they're an ally. You ask me why I saved you? The truth is, it never occurred to me to do otherwise."

I thought about what he said. It still didn't make sense though. I was broken out of my thoughts when he asked me a question.

"Actually, that reminds me. When we first heard you, we tried to get some help from some of the other Malvir conscripts and they completely ignored me. Why didn't anyone try to help you until we showed up and did it ourselves?"

"Why would they help me? I didn't meet any of them until this morning. We're complete strangers to each other."

Now it was the human's turn to look at me in confusion.

"So? You're still their fellow conscript. You might not know them that well, but they're still your buddies. They help you because they know you would do the same for them."

"Um... why would I do that?"

The human stared at me for several seconds before letting out two words I didn't understand. It sounded like "jeesus krist."

"What is with you guys? I understand you were just transferred to that unit, but usually they try to emphasise this thing in training..."

"What training?"

Once again, the human stared at me for several long seconds before asking "You mean to tell you they didn't give you any training? They just sent you here and gave you a weapon?"

"Until a few hours ago, I was a professor at a university. I'm not even supposed to be out here. I'm supposed to be immune from conscription. And why would there be training? Who could possibly provide training for war?"

"Don't you guys have a standing defence force? Professional conscripts who could easily provide at least some minimal training...?"

Professional... conscripts. I struggled to wrap my head around a concept that was utter nonsense.

After a few minutes the human, in a gentle voice, asked me "You don't have a standing defence force, do you?"

"Why would we? No one does."

Once again, the human said two words I didn't understand. This time, however, they sounded like "ho lee chit."

"When I learned Galactic Common, I wondered why your word for (another word I didn't understand. This time it sounded like "soljer") was so close to your word for "conscription." So they just grab you and send you out here same day, with absolutely no training?"

I looked at the human. Why was he so surprised? He was a conscript himself. He had to go through this himself. What was going on?

"Yes. I was told I couldn't go home until this city was successfully defended from the Kyfrap. If we don't win here, I die. Weren't you told the same thing?"

Instead of answering me, the human just asked me another question.

"And the Kyfrap? It's the same for them?"

"Of course it is. They were transported down to the surface and told they would be abandoned on this world unless they won the war. Its standard practice"

"Listen, I need to find my commanding officer and tell him what we just stepped into. But I need to tell you something first. Your language doesn't really have a word for what I am, but the closest is 'professional conscript.' I volunteered. All the humans you see around you are the same. They are volunteers. Now, stay here. I'll be back. I'll probably be accompanied by somebody who is going to want to ask you some more questions. But everything is going to be okay, alright? Trust me."

With that, the human ran off, and I was left struggling to understand what he just told me.

The human eventually came back with another human that asked me some more questions. I ended up explaining what I thought, at the time, were basic ideas. How wars were fought. How the conscription process worked. All things that they should already know as they themselves would have had to experience it when they were sent out here to help us.

Even when I was transferred to a proper Malvir hospital my mind grappled to understand my conversation with the human. None of it made sense.

With the help of the humans, the war was quickly won. Life went back to normal. No one else seemed to realise that there was something fundamentally different about the humans.

I've always been driven by a need to *understand*. It's why I went into philosophy. After the war, I was filled with a need to understand the humans.

I took a leave of absence from teaching and focused all my studies on the humans. I corresponded with several human universities who were only too happy to send me everything I required.

What I found filled me with horror.

As I've already explained, every sentient being encountered so far will fight to protect themselves and their loved ones, and that's it.

But the humans are *different*. Humans will march to war to defend anyone they feel like defending. They will fight and die for the safety of complete strangers. They will even run into danger to save wild animals.

More outrageously, they will fight and die for *concepts*. They had no problems risking their lives for philosophical concepts like their government or "freedom."

Throughout almost the entirety of their entertainment, the people who fought and died for these concepts were venerated. It was shown as an ideal to look up towards.

The governments of their world all had permanent armed forces. Not only that, most of those armed forces were somehow made up entirely of *volunteers*. The human wasn't lying when he said he was a "professional conscript."

Even worse, humans were capable of the worst barbarities imaginable when they were fighting for those concepts. Terrorism was a concept that was foreign for everyone except the humans. I cringed when I learned of suicide bombings. I nearly gave up my studies when I found out what happened in their mid 20th century.

I must have been the first Malvir to actually do a deep dive on the humans. While I was surprised at first, I realised that they were still considered a minor primitive species.

It seemed no one in the Malvir government cared why the humans did what they did. They didn't care that the humans put themselves into great debt renting out transports to ferry these "professional conscripts" out to us because they felt a debt of gratitude towards us. We were one of the only species that bothered to trade with them, and the technical trinkets we have them had an immense impact on their quality of life.

While with hindsight that seems incredibly stupid that no one in the Malvir government investigated, it's hard to blame them. What the humans did was still incomprehensible to nearly everyone. It's understandable they would just want to move past it as soon as possible.

But even after finally understanding the humans... after finally understanding why that human saved me on that day... there was one bit of horror left for me. Because, when I figured out what the humans were, my first thoughts weren't how to save my loved ones and I from these monsters just unleashed on the galactic stage. No, my first thoughts were *how to save my people*. How I could convince my government to establish closer ties to them and to one day hopefully forge an alliance with them. If we could ally with the humans, no one would ever war with us again once more species finally understood.

When I found out what the humans were, I also discovered that their thinking was contagious.

I knew that allying ourselves closely with the humans would expose my people to ways of thinking that is capable of producing the worst barbarities the Galaxy had ever seen.

But I'm not convinced that's a bad thing. Not when I remember a human who had risked his life to save another person from a completely different species he had never even met before.

I think the galaxy could use more of that, don't you?